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DIRECTORATE OF
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WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

South Vietnam's Dry-Season Campaign in Cambodia:

Aims and Unfinished Business

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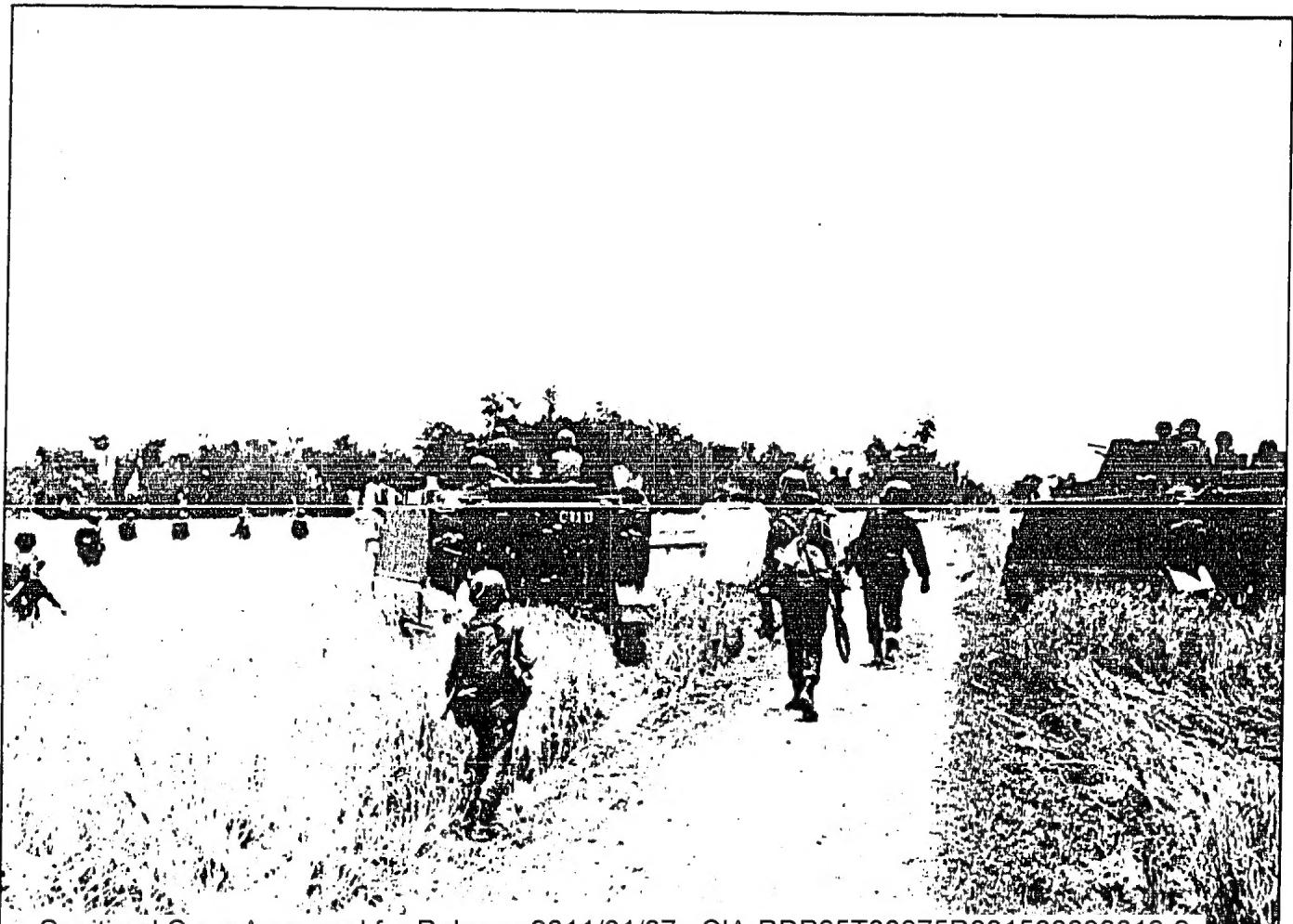
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South Vietnam's Dry-Season Campaign in Cambodia: Aims and Unfinished Business

South Vietnam's dry-season campaign in Cambodia is ending on a disappointing note because of ARVN's withdrawal under heavy enemy attack from the battered town of Snuol. The heavy losses in troops and equipment during the withdrawal reflect badly on ARVN's entire campaign; it is clear that after months of fighting the Communists are still present and potent close to the border of South Vietnam. The Snuol action also indicates that Communist main forces can still attack aggressively in the COSVN region, and that the South Vietnamese Army is vulnerable to the kind of pressure a determined enemy force can bring to bear. Recent moves by Communist forces in the Cambodia - South Vietnam border area, moreover, suggest that the enemy intends to carry out more attacks here soon, possibly to include some sharp thrusts back across the border into South Vietnam.

But the mauling of ARVN units around Snuol and earlier South Vietnamese setbacks near Dambe and the Chup plantation do not constitute the whole dry-season story; indeed, in many cases the South Vietnamese, with their substantial air support, inflicted more damage on the enemy than they received and their efforts helped keep the bulk of Communist forces in eastern Cambodia at bay during the 1970-71 dry season. Partly as a result of ARVN operations, South Vietnam's two southernmost military regions continued to enjoy a respite from the main-force war, and the Cambodian Government was given more time in which to train and equip its armed forces.



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Saigon's Strategy in Cambodia

The South Vietnamese strategy in eastern Cambodia during the dry season was shaped from the beginning both by a recognition that Communist strength there has a direct and critical bearing on the war in South Vietnam and by an awareness, soon reaffirmed by stiff enemy resistance in some areas, that ARVN's capability for fighting across the border is strictly limited. As early as last summer, President Thieu was wary of becoming overextended and bogged down in Cambodia in a way that might enable the Communists to slip back into South Vietnam or to operate there with greater freedom. At that time Thieu had to rein in his vice-president when Ky wanted to form an anti-Communist alliance with Phnom Penh and to commit ARVN troops to permanent occupation bases deep in Cambodia. Thieu made it clear to the Cambodians that there were limits to the help ARVN could provide and that the Cambodian Army would have to carry the main burden of defending the country.

With these considerations constantly in mind, Thieu often took a close personal interest in ARVN cross-border operations. He held back the aggressive General Do Cao Tri for several weeks last fall when Tri wanted to expand his border operations and push deeper into Cambodia. Thieu finally gave Tri the green light in December to go to the aid of stalled Cambodian forces on Route 7 west of the Mekong River near Kompong Cham. By that time it was clear that the Cambodians badly needed help there, and the President judged that assistance was within ARVN's means. The Communists did not seriously contest this operation and Thieu later allowed ARVN forces to help clear stretches of Route 4 and the Pich Nil Pass in southwestern Cambodia in January when the Cambodians once again were bogged down and could not handle the job themselves. South Vietnamese forces have also played the key role in keeping open both Route 1 between Saigon and Phnom Penh and the Mekong River water route to the Cambodian capital.

Turning Point in Cambodian Campaign

In late February and early March several developments combined to convince Thieu and the top army command that ARVN was being pushed to the limits of its capabilities—that it was necessary to shift to a more cautious approach in Cambodia. South Vietnamese forces that had earlier threatened Communist base areas north of Route 7 met strong enemy resistance and suffered heavy losses in February and March; before long there were reports of serious morale problems within ARVN's task forces in Cambodia.

At the same time, heavy fighting was going on in the Lam Son 719 operation in south Laos involving much-publicized South Vietnamese casualties and the sharp drawing down of scarce ARVN resources. Do Cao Tri was killed in an air crash in late February—an untimely event lending further discouragement to ARVN's Cambodian task forces. Because of these considerations and because there was no sign of a major Communist push back into South Vietnam, in early March Thieu told the new commander of ARVN troops in Cambodia, General Minh, to use more cautious tactics that would avoid heavy ARVN losses but still keep the Communists tied down. The South Vietnamese settled down to more defensive tactics along Route 7, and some Cambodian calls for help were turned down. The Communists counterattacked strongly again in mid-April when South Vietnamese forces probed enemy base areas just north of Route 7 near the Chup plantation. But then the war in eastern Cambodia settled into a lull for nearly six weeks, with neither side showing much ardor for battle, until intense enemy attacks broke out near Snuol in late May.

Saigon's Objectives and Accomplishments

South Vietnamese forces in Cambodia accomplished much less than the maximum goals set by some ARVN officers in both public and private statements at the outset of the dry season last fall. They talked confidently then of eroding the strength of Communist units, destroying their

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supplies and border bases, preventing the enemy from moving back into South Vietnam, and taking the pressure off Cambodia. The South Vietnamese certainly were not aggressive and effective enough to capture any large enemy supply caches or to inflict lasting damage on large enemy units in the main COSVN base areas north of Route 7. Although Saigon is claiming some 9,000 enemy killed since larger scale operations began in early February, the Communist units that were there six months ago are still in place and are still effective fighting forces.

the South Vietnamese have taken sizable casualties themselves—at least 800 dead and 4,000 wounded at latest report—and ARVN morale has been extremely frayed and ragged at times, especially when troops have stayed in forward positions under heavy enemy fire for sustained periods. South Vietnamese units that suffered the heaviest losses in Cambodia are now being reequipped and reconstituted.

Yet the South Vietnamese can point to some accomplishments. They kept enough pressure on COSVN's main striking forces (the 5th, 7th, 9th divisions) along the north of Route 7 both to reduce the immediate threat these units posed in Cambodia and to make it harder for their main elements to return to South Vietnam. That ARVN forces carried out these operations after many US combat units had been withdrawn from South Vietnam's Military Region 3 around Saigon adds to the significance of their performance. Three years ago the COSVN divisions were able to penetrate through ARVN forces and three US infantry divisions and threaten the Saigon area itself.

But what about the psychological impact of the campaign on the South Vietnamese Army? The campaign's effect on morale and motivation could be a critical factor during the next dry season beginning in the fall. Troops that fought in

Cambodia no doubt consider their assignment to engage the COSVN divisions on their own home ground as tough as anything they have ever been given. The punishment they suffered could discourage them from ever going back into Cambodia in strength again.

It seems likely, however, that some ARVN units may turn their experiences to advantage and become more seasoned forces than they were six months ago. Some of the ARVN units that fought in Cambodia had, in earlier years, rarely left their base camps in the provinces around Saigon except to take part in a coup in the capital. These units were long scorned by both US and South Vietnamese combat officers; a few years ago the prospect of their engaging the elite COSVN divisions in Cambodia would have been unthinkable. Thus, in spite of their losses, setbacks, and unimpressive performance from time to time, it seems likely that ARVN units learned some valuable lessons, such as how to provide much of their own logistics and air support and operate without US liaison officers and advisers. Additionally, one positive result of ARVN's performance at Snuol is that it has finally given President Thieu an obvious enough reason to relieve the inept and lackluster commander of the ARVN 5th Division—a step US advisers have been urging for some time. A more extensive shakeup of ARVN leadership doubtless would still be beneficial.

Communist Objectives and Accomplishments

The effectiveness of South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia must be judged mainly in terms of how seriously they interfered with Communist plans in Cambodia. Many captured enemy documents, a great deal of indoctrination material in Communist radiobroadcasts, and the actions of enemy units on the ground, all indicate that the Communists recognize that a strong position in eastern Cambodia is a prerequisite for raising the ante in the southern part of South Vietnam. Consequently last year they set out to develop new overland and river supply routes from south Laos to Cambodia to help offset the loss of the

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Sihanoukville logistics channel. At the same time they proceeded to build up a Communist insurgency in Cambodia and to consolidate their control over base areas fairly close to the Cambodia-South Vietnam border. Staging areas near the border are, of course, essential to long-range Communist goals in South Vietnam, for they provide the outside support required by main forces, guerrillas, and the enemy apparatus inside South Vietnam.

The Communists can claim some success in each of these areas. They have built some 200 miles of new roads and way stations forming an elaborate linkup between south Laos and Cambodia. South Vietnamese cross-border operations have not been targeted in this area and therefore have had no impact on this enemy effort. The ARVN operation, however, may have disrupted Communist plans to establish secure supply lines south of the Chhlong-Chup area in eastern Cambodia. Indeed, in recent months ARVN officers have stated that their presence along Route 7 was designed to forestall enemy supply movements to the south. The fact, however, that the ARVN presence does not extend along the entire length of Route 7 has enabled the Communists to circumvent South Vietnamese blocking operations to some extent, especially between Suong and Tonle Bet. In the task of building a Cambodian "insurgency" the Vietnamese Communists can also claim some success. This movement, with the Vietnamese Communists providing the backbone, presents a growing challenge to the government in the countryside, even though South Vietnamese operations may have diverted Communist energies and resources in some areas from the task of building up the Cambodian Communists.

The Communists also have succeeded in holding the COSVN base areas north of Route 7 in Kompong Cham Province, and some large enemy units are still located within a few miles of the South Vietnam border. Yet the enemy is a long way from making up for the loss of Sihanoukville and from enjoying the kind of safe

haven provided by Cambodia under Sihanouk. Moreover, the Communists have not been able to get nearly as much help as before in the form of manpower and materiel to their people still active inside South Vietnam.

The enemy divisions now north of Route 7 in Cambodia at one time used War Zones C and D within South Vietnam as staging bases from which to bring pressure to bear on major Vietnamese population centers; they were a strong backup to Viet Cong local forces, guerrillas, and subversive cadre and, in turn, received support from those groups. After the spring of 1969 these enemy divisions pulled back to the Cambodian border, and after the allied attacks into Cambodia in 1970 they pulled back farther still. With each pullback the system of mutual support among Communist main, local, and guerrilla forces—a central feature of the Vietnamese Communist system when it is strong and healthy—broke down a little more. During the past dry season, with South Vietnamese forces deployed in the gap between Communist main forces in Cambodia and those forces remaining in South Vietnam, the enemy's mutual support system has been interrupted even further. The best enemy main forces are isolated from South Vietnamese battlefields, and the enemy's local apparatus has had to fend for itself.

This situation has obtained in large part because the Communists decided they had to concentrate on building a strong position in Cambodia before they attempted to bring more military assets to bear against South Vietnam. COSVN divisions in eastern Cambodia have been engaged in a holding action while the Communists work on their supply system, develop local support, build base areas, and wait for better opportunities to strike in South Vietnam. The divisions have harassed the South Vietnamese constantly along most of the Route 7 front, but by and large they have been on the defensive, usually showing eagerness for heavy battles only when South Vietnamese forces approached especially sensitive base areas. In February and March, for example,

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when the South Vietnamese were operating around the Chup Plantation and Dambe, the Communists massed their forces, sluged it out with ARVN units, and succeeded in protecting areas that they considered important.

But whatever the Communists have been able to accomplish in Cambodia, they have been unable to stop the slow erosion of their strength in the southern part of South Vietnam or to furnish much support to their counterpacification effort in the region around Saigon and in the Mekong Delta. Having a breathing spell has enabled the Saigon government to make substantial headway in consolidating its position in these critical areas.

Moreover, just as various Communist actions are mutually supporting, whatever gains Saigon has made in the countryside in MRs 3 and 4 during the past year will make it that much harder for the Communists to return and to improve their weakened military and political apparatus.

The Past Is Prologue

The South Vietnamese campaign in Cambodia was only a limited test of Saigon's ability to cope with the Communists as US forces withdraw. South Vietnamese determination and ability to carry the fight into enemy strongholds across the border were found wanting, but so

Air View of War Damaged Snuol



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were the Communists' capabilities for bringing main-force strength to bear in the southern half of South Vietnam. Because neither side was ready or willing to play all or even most of its cards on this front this year, the lessons for Vietnamization are by no means clear-cut, and the past dry-season should be regarded primarily as prologue for the fighting yet to come.

If the Communists had made a strong effort to thrust back into South Vietnam or to sustain attacks like recent ones they have launched against Cambodian forces northeast of Phnom Penh, or if the South Vietnamese had maintained their drive against the COSVN base areas north of Route 7, it might be easier to say which side looks more like a winner. As the campaign was actually fought, however, one must balance the breathing spell the South Vietnamese helped pre-

serve for the important Saigon - Mekong Delta region against the strong position and units the Communists have been able to maintain in Cambodia adjacent to that region.

For now, the South Vietnamese have been spared the turmoil and insecurity that would have resulted had the big-unit war spilled back across the border, and the Communists must be chagrined to see another year pass with their position still deteriorating in the southern part of South Vietnam. But the Communists can take some satisfaction in the fact that they have developed new supply channels and have maintained control over the large parts of Cambodia they need for the longer term struggle. And as the South Vietnamese look ahead, the memories of the battles near Dambe, Chup, and Snoul must be disquieting, for they point toward more heavy fighting in the future.

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